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President: Mr. Thomson ..... (Fiji)

The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

Agenda item 119

Commemoration of the abolition of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade

Report of the Secretary-General (A/71/170)

The President: The scale of the human suffering caused by the transatlantic slave trade is an affront to humankind's conscience. For over 400 years, this reprehensible practice continued and was the largest forced migration in human history. More than 15 million men, women and children, forced against their will to leave their homes, families and communities, were victims of this inhumane and barbaric system. Many lost their lives as the slave ships crossed the Atlantic Ocean, and those who survived were forced to endure lives of humiliation and brutality.

While people were bought and sold like commodities, human dignity was stripped from all concerned. Forced to work under deplorable conditions on plantations, in textile mills and factories, slaves suffered while others built their fortunes on the back of this miserable system. The commitment of Member States to ensuring that humankind does not forget this dark time of human history is to be commended.

The declaration of 25 March as the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the establishment of a permanent memorial — *The Ark of Return* — at Headquarters serve as permanent reminders. They help to educate us and future generations of the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade.

Modern forms of slavery plague our world today, including human trafficking, forced labour and child labour. The memory of the transatlantic slave trade gives us a huge moral imperative to effectively combat modern slavery. That includes providing productive employment and decent work for all, in line with the provisions of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Also in memory of the slave trade, racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and intolerance must be overcome whenever and wherever we find it.

The historical struggle of enslaved people for freedom and equality took great courage, hope and determination. These qualities, exercised by a long-oppressed people, inspire us today as we work to combat inequality and exploitation. The eventual achievement of emancipation gives us strength today in the enduring human aspiration and defence of freedom.

Mr. Webson (Antigua and Barbuda): I have the honour to speak on behalf of the member States of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM).

CARICOM would like to thank the Secretary-General for his report (A/71/170) entitled "Permanent memorial to and remembrance of the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade: status of the United Nations Trust Fund for Partnerships — Permanent Memorial". We also take note and acknowledge in particular the decision set forth in paragraph 6 of resolution 69/19, recalled in the Secretary-General's

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report, to use any funds remaining in the Trust Fund for the maintenance of the memorial.

We also would like to express our profound gratitude to the Secretary-General for the excellent management of the funds, and to our partners across the various regional groups within the United Nations for their support for the CARICOM initiative to erect a permanent memorial as a lasting tribute to the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. CARICOM also expresses its sincere appreciation to the Member States, organizations and individuals that have made contributions to the Trust Fund for the construction of the memorial.

CARICOM envisions that the memorial, *The Ark of Return*, will speak volumes to hundreds of thousands of people in the years to come. It will encourage people of all races, colours, creeds and cultural and social standing to respect each other as one people. In that regard, CARICOM calls on the Secretary-General to continue to take appropriate steps to enhance world public awareness of the commemorative activities and the permanent memorial at the Headquarters. We also request that the Department of Public Information of the Secretariat continue to take appropriate steps to enhance world public awareness of the commemorative activities and the permanent memorial at the Headquarters, in cooperation with the countries concerned and the relevant organizations and bodies of the United Nations system.

CARICOM reiterates that the progress we have made should not cause us to rest on any laurels. In fact, quite to the contrary, we should redouble our efforts and use all means at our disposal to combat racism and eliminate racial discrimination. The modern-day manifestations of slavery should be countered with all our might. We who have come out victorious from the injustices and inequity of slavery should be at the vanguard of ensuring that this tragedy never occurs again.

Mrs. Rodríguez Abascal (Cuba) (*spoke in Spanish*): We thank the Secretary-General for the report (A/71/170) being discussed today.

The slave trade and the legacy of slavery are the root causes of profound social and economic inequalities, hatred, fanaticism, racism and prejudice that today continue to affect people of African descent. At the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, held in Durban in 2001, which recognized that slavery and the transatlantic slave trade would qualify today as crimes against humanity, the historical leader of the Cuban Revolution, Fidel Castro stated,

> "The inhuman exploitation imposed on the peoples of three continents, including Asia, marked forever the destiny and lives of over 4.5 billion people living in the Third World today, whose poverty, unemployment, illiteracy and health rates, as well as their infant mortality, life expectancy and other calamities — too many, in fact, to enumerate here — are certainly awesome and harrowing. They are the current victims of that atrocity, which lasted centuries, and the ones who clearly deserve compensation for the horrendous crimes perpetrated against their ancestors and peoples."

A remedy for, and full compensation to, the peoples and groups affected by a crime as horrific as it is imprescriptible is an inescapable moral duty. In that vein, Cuba supports the judicious request made earlier on behalf of the States members of the Caribbean Community. Similarly, it would be fair to expect special and differentiated treatment for developing countries, in particular in Africa, with respect to their international economic relations.

Developed countries, along with their consumer societies, are responsible for the accelerated and nearly unstoppable destruction of the environment. They have been the main beneficiaries of conquest, colonization, slavery, the transatlantic slave trade and the heartless exploitation and extermination of hundreds of millions of descendants of peoples of the South. Those countries have also been enriched by the unjust economic order imposed on humankind and the international financial institutions created exclusively for and by them as new forms of domination and subjugation.

As a result of that cruel brand of commerce, approximately 1.3 million Africans landed on our island, most of whom came from the sub-Saharan area of the African continent. With their arrival, such African ethnic groups as the Lucumí, Carabalí, Congo, Ganga, Mina, Bibi and Yoruba, among others, had an immediate impact on the colonial society of the time. Following a complex process of transculturation, the Cuban nationality evolved into what is essentially a mixture of Hispanic and African influences. My country is extremely proud of its African roots, which account for our cultural uniqueness and characteristics.

In the various periods of wars that led to the self-determination of the Cuban people, freed slaves and their descendants played a major role.

Despite the economic, commercial and financial blockade against us, Cuba will maintain its cooperation programmes with African, Caribbean and Third World countries as part of the joint efforts aimed at reversing the consequences of the slave trade and the other shameful iterations of capitalism in its phases of colonialism, neocolonialism and transnational financial domination. Slavery and the transatlantic slave trade are among the most serious crimes perpetrated against humankind that have not been properly addressed, and their consequences on society today have not been appropriately acknowledged.

We reaffirm the importance of further strengthening the activities of the United Nations and other international organizations, such as UNESCO, in this area. That is the least that the international community can do to remedy the crimes of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade perpetrated against humankind.

Mr. Joshi (India): We thank the Secretary-General for his report (A/71/170) on the follow-up to the commemoration of the two-hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade.

The transatlantic slave trade represents one of the darkest phases in human history, when, several centuries ago, forces of globalization began to shape the modern world. The impacts of the slave trade continue to be felt acutely even today. It is important to understand what the slave trade meant, so that we can draw lessons from our collective history and make sure that it cannot happen again. It is equally important for the younger and future generations to carry that memory.

At its very basic level, the transatlantic slave trade was the manifestation of naked greed and the immoral pursuit of profit coupled with the unbridled abuse of power exercised over the weak. The sheer scale of this crime against humanity is mind-boggling. It lasted for four centuries, destroying lives and communities across generations from vast regions of Africa, South America and the Caribbean — on both sides of the Atlantic. It fundamentally altered the societies, economies and polities in those regions for centuries thereafter. Importantly, it helped achieve great wealth, prosperity and progress for some countries, yet it was built upon unspeakable misery and destruction in distant continents, as a frightening example of what ungoverned and lawless globalization can lead to.

While uprooted African communities have contributed greatly to local economies, they have also contributed immensely to and influenced the arts, culture and life of societies where they now live. However, the deep wounds inflicted by the slave trade continue to fester today. Entire communities, including indigenous communities, continue to face the scars of deep-rooted racial discrimination, oppression and chronic poverty. The wounds are also reflected in the chronic underdeveloped and distorted economies that were deliberately designed for the profit of the elite in the faraway lands in a bygone era.

It is our collective responsibility to prevent the recurrence of crimes and injustices such as those associated with the slave trade. It is our duty to remember the sacrifice that millions of people were forced to make when they were uprooted from their homelands over generations to toil in miserable conditions for the profit of others.

It was therefore satisfying to note that the efforts of the Caribbean Community, supported by African nations and others, finally led to the establishment of the permanent memorial, *The Ark of Return*, last year at the United Nations. India is proud to have joined as one of the lead contributors to United Nations Trust Fund for Partnerships — Permanent Memorial.

The International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, observed on 25 March every year, honours the memory of the millions who suffered under that brutal system and helps raise awareness of the injustice and dangers of racism and prejudice. This year, to mark the Day, India and the Department of Public Information co-organized an exhibition on the history of enslaved East Africans who were taken to India, many of whom rose to positions of military and political authority in our country. The exhibition brings out the comparatively greater social mobility experienced by those individuals in India. UNESCO has also played a key role in organizing and linking programmes through the Slave Route project to spread understanding of the impact and consequences of the slave trade.

Following the abolition of slavery, the colonial Powers turned to using millions of Indian indentured labourers, at virtually no cost, to work on plantations across the world in order to perpetuate their economic

domination. The UNESCO project on the International Indentured Labour Route is another significant effort to preserve the memory and lessons of that era.

We must continue to raise awareness about the slave trade through education and outreach activities in order to promote a greater understanding of how our complex world has been shaped and what can be done to avoid repeating the injustices of the past.

Mr. Wenaweser (Liechtenstein): Today's debate offers us an opportunity to pay tribute to the victims of one of the most heinous crimes committed against humankind, but it also allows us to reflect on the continued relevance of the subject today. Liechtenstein is proud to have contributed to the creation of a permanent memorial, whose presence near the entrance of the General Assembly Building is a powerful reminder not only of the tragedy of the past, but also of the challenges that remain with regard to slavery in our day.

Over a period of centuries, some 15 million men, women and children fell victim to the transatlantic slave trade, one of the darkest chapters in human history. Victims were forcibly removed from their families and homes and transferred overseas in the most appalling and inhumane conditions, resulting in innumerable deaths. Those who survived were subjected to forced labour and abuse and were permanently deprived of the most basic human rights. The monument we have erected is a dignified and important reminder of these terrifying crimes against humanity. It must also serve as a reminder of our common commitment to ensuring the absolute prohibition of slavery in all its forms. Looking at today's reality, we have to admit that we are far from reaching this goal.

An estimated 45 million people live in conditions that qualify as modern slavery — more people than ever before. The scourge of slavery persists, even though its prohibition is a jus cogens norm in international law, indeed one of the most powerful of such norms. Despite the fact that slavery is outlawed universally, human trafficking and enslavement are crimes committed on a large scale and with widespread impunity. Today every single country is affected by modern slavery, which generates billions of dollars every year. Modern slavery and human trafficking do not simply constitute one of the biggest human rights scandals of our time, but they are also one of the most lucrative business models for organized crime.

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in particular has generated fresh and dynamic momentum to address modern slavery in all of its aspects. Modern slavery and human trafficking are mentioned in 3 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. The 2030 Agenda therefore gives us the platform to tackle the scourge, not merely as a law-enforcement issue but indeed in a much broader manner.

Given the complexity of the phenomenon, we all have an opportunity to contribute to the achievement of our common goal to abolish modern slavery. Liechtenstein is currently focusing on two aspects in particular.

First, we are trying to address the business side of modern slavery. As it is one of the world's most profitable illegal business models, we can make use of tools that have proven effective in other areas — for example, disrupting financial flows and using relevant data for criminal prosecutions: in short, following the money. We are planning to generate a set of concrete measures that will help enhance coordination among national judiciaries and enable effective prosecutions.

Secondly, we are working to address the enormous impunity gap, with action at the international level. As national judiciaries have systematically failed, there is a clear case for involving and making use of international criminal justice, in particular the International Criminal Court (ICC). The Rome Statute, the founding treaty of the ICC, has jurisdiction over enslavement as both a war crime and a crime against humanity. Given the universal nature of the phenomenon of modern slavery, the Court can play a dual role by creating incentives for States to investigate and prosecute at the national level and by investigating and prosecuting itself in cases where the impunity gap persists. Together with the Court, we will continue to explore options to that end.

Human trafficking and modern slavery have been on the United Nations agenda for years, but we have clearly not been effective in addressing the scourge. We are grateful to see a new momentum from the membership to do better and welcome the upcoming opportunities to do so. Key among them will be the open debate in the Security Council in December as follow-up to the first-ever presidential statement adopted by the Council on human trafficking in armed conflict, in 2015 (S/PRST/2015/25).

As input for the discussion, we organized, together with our partners from the United Nations University,

the United Kingdom and civil society partners, a seminar that has produced a set of recommendations for inclusion in the draft resolution that we believe the Security Council should adopt in December. We presented a report to members in early September and hope that its recommendations, particularly those concerning action, will be widely read and processed. We welcome the leadership of the Council on the topic. At the same time, the phenomena of human trafficking and modern slavery are of course not limited to times of armed conflict, which is why many of the report's recommendation can also be applied outside the context of the Council's work.

Another important opportunity is the upcoming review of the United Nations Global Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Persons, scheduled for October 2017. We look forward to a well-managed process that will allow us to explore new options for action that we may have neglected in the past and to move forward on the basis of consensus. The review year should also be the moment for us to work towards the universal ratification of the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, also known as the Palermo Convention. Next week, together with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and our partners from Austria, Slovenia and Switzerland, we will organize a side event to that end as part of our activities in the context of the women and peace and security debate in the Security Council.

Modern slavery is a complex phenomenon that affects all of us and should leave none of us indifferent. As individuals, policymakers and consumers, we all have an opportunity to make a small contribution to eradicate what is both a human tragedy and a large obstacle to sustainable development. We believe that such action is the best contribution that we can make to commemorate this day in a meaningful way.

Mr. Rattray (Jamaica): Jamaica wishes to thank the Secretary-General for his report (A/71/170) being considered today.

We also extend our gratitude to the United Nations Office for Partnerships (UNOP), which over the years has managed the Trust Fund established to support the permanent memorial. UNOP has operated at the highest levels of professionalism and accountability, thereby demonstrating once again that, as States Members of the United Nations, we can be justly proud of the high calibre of the staff serving our Organization. I offer special thanks to the Secretary-General and to the Deputy Secretary-General, whose support for the permanent memorial initiative has been unwavering from the outset. Their support has not only been symbolic, but has been manifested in specific ways that directly contributed to the success of the project. In fact, the very selection of UNOP, as an entity specifically designated to support the implementation of the project, attests to the importance that was accorded to it by the Secretary-General.

UNOP played a critical role throughout all stages of the project's implementation and ensured that it remained on track and was completed on time and on budget. In addition, it partnered with the Permanent Memorial Committee and with UNESCO to organize the international competition that resulted in the selection of the winning design, *The Ark of Return*. The Permanent Memorial Committee benefited immensely from the professional support provided by UNOP, which acted as the custodian for the United Nations Trust Fund for Partnerships — Permanent Memorial, and I take this opportunity to place on record the Committee's sincere gratitude.

As demonstrated in the report of the Secretary-General, Member States provided the vast majority of the voluntary contributions used to undertake the permanent memorial initiative. We therefore owe an immense debt of gratitude to all Member States for their consistent support of the project. Our special thanks go to the over 100 Member States — a wide range of developed and developing States, drawn from all geographical regions, whether or not directly affected by the transatlantic slave trade — that made financial contributions. That demonstrates the importance that we have collectively attached to the permanent memorial not just as a tangible symbol to honour the victims and recognize those who struggled against the horror of slavery, but also for the role the memorial plays as a reminder of the legacies of slavery and the need for us to take action to address them.

Civil society, the private sector and private individuals also contributed meaningfully to the Fund. We thank these partners for their commitment and support. Their inclusion among the list of contributors demonstrates that the noble ideals surrounding the project resonated with people across the world. It is indeed gratifying that the permanent memorial

represents part of the United Nations commitment to one of its founding tenets, which is that our work here must always be on behalf of "We the peoples of the United Nations".

The Ark of Return is already attracting numerous visitors, including those who are participating in events and tours at the United Nations. We are confident that its aesthetic appeal and universal message will endure and that all who visit it will feel the impact of its continuing message. We recall that its design is purposely sustainable, including its use of solar energy for its lighting and the use of recycled water for its tear drop and fountain features. We fully support the decision of the General Assembly that the balance of funds in the Trust Fund should be retained by the United Nations to ensure the maintenance and upkeep of the memorial, and we take due note of the information provided in the Secretary-General's report that this is being undertaken. We look forward to the permanent memorial continuing to be a source of pride and inspiration to all its visitors over the years to come.

Ms. Mendelson (United States of America): In his memoir, *Twelve Years a Slave*, Simon Northup, a free American who had been enslaved in 1841, wrote,

> "In an hour, perhaps two, my heart leaped to my throat, as the key rattled the door again. I, who had been so lonely and who had longed so ardently to see someone, I cared not who, now shuddered at the thought of man's approach. A human face was fearful to me, especially a white one."

Northup wrote these words after having become a victim of this transatlantic slave industry. He articulated the fear and the experience of one of millions of women, girls, men and boys who lost their freedom, their lives, their families and their dignity as a result of the transatlantic slave trade.

The United States recognizes slavery's enduring impact on the development of our country and that of other countries. Collectively, we must commit to always remembering slavery's devastation, understanding its essence and striving to heal its enduring wounds. Descendants of slaves have made vital contributions to the United States. From the freed slaves who shared their stories to the leaders of the abolitionist movement who propelled progress in the United States, to the early educators and agitators against segregation and lynchings who paved the way for the modern civil rights movement, to leaders in the arts, science and sports, descendants of slaves have made the United States a stronger and better nation.

Descendants of slaves have contributed to our ability as a nation to both confront and acknowledge injustice and to build a more inclusive and just society. This year we made significant strides in our shared work to promote remembrance of the victims of slavery. The down payment we have made towards a permanent memorial at the United Nations is a start. In Washington, D.C., the Smithsonian Institution opened its nineteenth museum, the National Museum of African American History and Culture on 24 September 2016, ensuring that the African American story, its roots and its successes are prominently featured in our nation's capital. As President Obama noted at the opening of the museum,

> "the best history does not just sit behind a glass case; it helps us to understand what is outside the case. The best history helps us recognize the mistakes that we have made and the dark corners of the human spirit that we need to guard against. And yes, a clear-eyed view of history can make us uncomfortable and shake us out of familiar narratives. But it is precisely because of that discomfort that we learn and grow and harness our collective power to make this nation more perfect."

Another way that we memorialize victims of slavery is through our commitment to justice in the present. In our reflection on this day, we do no honour to the victims of the transatlantic slave trade if we fail to confront the modern manifestation of slavery in the trafficking of women, men and children, which continues to plague the world, with estimates of 20 to 40 million victims globally. We can use commemorations such as this one and the International Decade for People of African Descent to deepen our awareness. We can pay respect to those who did not make it through the Middle Passage and to the survivors of these tragic events through such art as *The Ark of Return* — a visible reminder of the past and an inspiration for the future. And we can commit to implementing the Sustainable Development Goal targets on eradicating human trafficking.

As we join together, let us also renew our commitments to do even more to end discrimination and exploitation. The call for "never again" rings true today, and the evidence is clear: while we have come a long way, we have much more to do to stop modern slavery.

The President: We have heard the last speaker in the debate on this item. I thank Member States for their acknowledgment of the great significance of today's commemoration.

The General Assembly has thus concluded this stage of its consideration of agenda item 119.

The meeting rose at 10.50 a.m.